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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000255

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: GEAGEA PLEASED WITH 2/14 RALLY, PLEADS
PLIGHT OF CHRISTIANS

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Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Michele J. Sison for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In his first meeting with Charge Sison, Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea, pleased with the results of the February 14 rally, said he believed the March 14 bloc had proven it is a popular movement able to rally its supporters and speak with a unified voice. He predicted that the Arab League initiative would end in failure, and listed the Special Tribunal as key to stopping Syrian interference in Lebanon. Geagea also blamed the Siniora government for not doing enough to help Lebanon's Christians, and stressed that a meeting with President Bush during his upcoming visit to Washington would help overcome the perception that Christians are second-class citizens within March 14. End Summary.

¶2. (C) The Charge, accompanied by DCM and Pol/Econ Chief, paid an introductory call on Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea at his residence in Marab on February 15. Geagea's advisors Elie Khoury and Joseph Nehme and wife, MP Setrida Geagea, also attended the meeting.

MARCH 14 IS A POPULAR MOVEMENT

¶3. (C) The Charge, praising March 14 for delivering a superb message during the February 14 commemoration of the third anniversary of the assassination of former PM Rafiq Hariri, asked how March 14 could continue strategically in communicating a unified message. The real message of the rally Geagea answered, is that March 14 is, more than ever, a popular movement. March 14 rank and file is solid, he stated, as shown by the fact that they stood in the rain for hours during the rally, and they are Lebanon's future.

¶4. (C) Although it is political alliance made up of many diverse blocs, including Hariri's Future Movement, Lebanese Forces, and Walid Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party, its

members shared the same goals, even if they approached them differently. Each party must appeal to its own constituency, Geagea explained; Hariri used the rally to commemorate the martyr Rafiq Hariri, while Lebanese Forces (whose supporters were out in full force) strove to rally March 14 Christians. It's the "same agenda in different wrappings," he said.

¶15. (C) Geagea confirmed that IRI's Chris Reid was meeting with representatives from all of March 14's blocs, and, in his opinion, was doing a good job. I don't know if we can do better, he said; each leader has his own style, which should be enhanced, rather than hindered. But at the same time we must keep the same political message, i.e., either we all go to peace or we all go to war. I'm not worried about this, he concluded.

ARAB LEAGUE INITIATIVE
"DOOMED TO FAILURE"

¶16. (C) Asked whether the Arab League initiative would succeed, Geagea responded with a short, "No." Syria does not want a presidential election, he added. This was clear from Amr Moussa's last meeting when Hariri asked whether, if March 14 accepted a 10/10/10 cabinet, the opposition would agree to holding the election. This surprised Aoun, whose answer was no, Geagea claimed, prompting Moussa to ask Aoun how he could say no when Berri had said yes. Berri and Aoun then spoke privately, after which Aoun said "maybe" if additional conditions on cabinet portfolios were agreed. Aoun's position is rigid, Geagea agreed; it is not based on strategic calculations but rather on one his desire to be president.

¶17. (C) The Arab League initiative, Geagea concluded, is "doomed to failure" and has at most two to three weeks of

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life left. After that, March 14's options are to reshuffle the cabinet or proceed with a half plus one presidential election. Geagea opined, however, that there was no harm in Moussa's trying again during his return visit February 23-24.

SPECIAL TRIBUNAL OF "UTMOST IMPORTANCE"

¶18. (C) Geagea agreed on the importance of Ban ki-Moon's announcement on the Special Tribunal, stressing that the Tribunal is of the "utmost importance" to March 14 supporters, who have been promised the Tribunal for three years. We need to see results by mid-June, he added; any delay or hindrance would be a complete disaster.

¶19. (C) Geagea pointed to the most recent Executive Order against Syria as another key tool, but said he feared that only "junior" names would be designated. The Charge encouraged Geagea to provide the Embassy with any information he had that could help in building evidentiaries.

SINIORA GOVERNMENT NOT
HELPING CHRISTIAN CAUSE

¶10. (C) Geagea was quick to turn the Charge's inquiry about assistance for Christians displaced during Lebanon's 15-year civil war into a lengthy diatribe against the Siniora government. Syria purged Lebanese Christians for 15 years, he said, and now we are out of the equation. Although he personally had good relations with PM Siniora, Geagea said Christian representation in the lower levels of government was weak, and as a result assistance usually went to the constituencies of the person in charge, usually a non-Christian.

¶11. (C) Expanding on this them, Setrida Geagea said the Siniora government's priorities were rebuilding Nahr al-Barid

and south Lebanon, and it was receiving huge amounts of money from abroad, but none of it was going to the Christian communities. Furthermore, the Christians that were receiving money tended to be those in the Chouf (Walid Jumblatt's region) who were displaced in the 1980s; Samir added that in Aley, only one-third of the money was going to Christians. Furthermore, the heads of key institutions responsible for appropriating the funds were either Hariri people or Druse, he said, repeating that there was a "disequilibrium" within the Siniora government.

¶12. (C) The Sunnis feel strong because they have the Saudis behind them, as well as NGOs and the public administration. The Shia feel strong because of Hizballah, which received \$400,000 million from Iran immediately following the end of the 2006 conflict with Israel, enabling it to give each person \$12,000. The Christians rely on westerners, who, however, prefer to maintain "equidistance" between all confessions, with the result that their money is distributed equally among all the groups, Samir said.

¶13. (C) The Charge noted that the U.S. had provided nearly \$1 billion in assistance to Lebanon since 2006, and was committed to supporting its institutions, including the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and Internal Security Forces (ISF). Acknowledging that much of this assistance, especially budgetary support, was not visible to the man on the street, she said the U.S., through USAID and other types of assistance, was looking for tangible ways to help the Lebanese people. Geagea asked that USAID be more directed toward Christian areas, which are in need of schools, hospitals, and infrastructure, he said.

GEAGEA GOES TO WASHINGTON

¶14. (C) Turning to his March visit to the United States, Geagea stressed two points. First, said Geagea, since Hariri had met President Bush twice and Jumblatt had met him once,

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it was critical that he be given the same treatment. Otherwise, he said, it looks bad to March 14 Christians. Setrida added that the meeting with the President was very important to Lebanese Forces, especially given Aoun's alliance with Hizballah, as it would send a message not only to Lebanon's Christian community but to Lebanese as a whole.

¶15. (C) Second, as Nasrallah's speech at the February 14 funeral of Moughnieh clearly showed, Hizballah is calling for a new war, which it will take outside Lebanon. Therefore, Geagea needed strengthened personal security measures he said (referring to a request already passed to the desk for a security detail while in the U.S.).

COMMENT

¶16. (C) We would almost expect Geagea to give the Arab League initiative an early burial, given that his preferred option remains proceeding with a half plus one vote. But he did not push this as strongly as he had in previous meetings, probably realizing the time is not yet ripe. Meanwhile, he probably hopes to use his visit to Washington to boost his own prospects for a ministerial position, hence his insistence on a meeting with the President.

¶17. (C) Personal ambitions aside, we do believe his arguments that, as one of March 14's most prominent Christian leaders, not receiving him at the level of his Sunni and Druze counterparts would be interpreted in Lebanon -- and no doubt capitalized on by the opposition -- as a signal that March 14 is still a Sunni-dominated organization in which the Christian element is only a tool. Post therefore recommends that Washington give serious consideration to Geagea's request for high-level appointments. End comment.

